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## THE GREAT WAR AND THE INSTINCT OF THE HERD.

I. W. HOWERTH.

DARWIN said, "Judging from the habits of savages and of the greater number of the *Quadrumanæ*, primeval men, and even their ape-like progenitors, probably lived in society."<sup>1</sup> But the relative weakness of early man, the consequent necessity and obvious advantage of co-operation in defence against his enemies, his success in the struggle for existence as shown by his wide diffusion, as well as the social disposition of the animals nearest him in the scale of life, make it almost a certainty that primeval men were social, that they lived in groups, that they possessed the herd instinct. While there is a difference of opinion, as McDougall remarks, as to the exact form of early society, as to whether it was a promiscuous horde or a group made up chiefly of blood relations, something after the nature of a patriarchal family, anthropologists are practically agreed that primitive man was gregarious in his habits.<sup>2</sup>

While we read without surprise that primitive man was gregarious, we are likely to forget that modern man, although many of his acts have lost their fixed and instinctive character, or been replaced by acts of will, is quite as gregarious as his primitive ancestor. This is clearly shown by his disinclination to solitude, by his normal forms of recreation, and by the disposition of men to herd together in towns and cities. Solitary confinement is everywhere regarded as a mode of punishment peculiarly severe, and is looked upon by many as a form of torture so peculiarly dreadful that it should be prescribed only in exceptional cases, and in civilized countries not at all. "Misery loves

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<sup>1</sup> *Descent of Man*, Pt. I, Ch. 4, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> McDougall, W., *Social Psychology*, p. 85.

company"; so also does happiness. It is a sociological fact, then, confirmed by prison discipline, as well as by bachelorhood, that it is not good for man to be alone.

As to our modes of recreation, everyone must have observed that with most people the one essential condition of having a good time is to be one of a crowd. People flock together at the seashore, in public parks, and in places of entertainment and amusement. Many go to church, even, to see and be seen, to satisfy their herd instinct, rather than to profit by religious instruction. Again, the extraordinary growth of cities, not only in this country but in all civilized lands, is due not alone to economic motives but also to the blind instinct which drives men to seek the company of their fellows. Man, then, is a gregarious animal, as gregarious as the horse, the elephant, the ox, the buffalo, the sheep, the deer, the bee, or the ant.

Now the satisfaction of this gregarious or herd instinct in man has resulted in the formation of many and various social groups: families, clans, tribes, states, nations; and, within the nation, parties, professions, denominations, clubs, sects, classes, and the like. But the largest social unit thus far definitely formed is the nation. In times of peace its herdlike qualities are not conspicuously manifested, but in war, when the bonds of instinctive feeling woven in the loom of biological and social history, and "The mystic cord of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone," as Lincoln expressed it,—when these draw the people together, herd phenomena begin plainly to manifest themselves. We call them manifestations of patriotism, but patriotism is at bottom an instinctive herd emotion. It is "the emotion of his national crowd in the heart of the individual citizen."

A nation, then, is a herd. This is not a fanciful analogy; it is a sociological fact, none the less real because in normal times it is only dimly revealed. A drove of cattle grazing peacefully on a plain is none the less a herd, although distinctive herd phenomena do not then conspicuously appear.

Of course in calling a nation a herd we use the word in a purely scientific sense and with none of the disparagement that is implied by the phrase "the common herd."

Now in the recent world-war situation we had essentially a conflict of herds. We should therefore have expected that in such a conflict the usual and primary characteristics of the herd would be manifested. Let us turn to a brief consideration of a few of these characteristics.

First, then, the herd unites in the presence of danger. This is a well-known fact in the case of animals. Cattle or horses may be grazing peacefully apart, but at the sign of danger they draw together. Wolves fighting among themselves cease when threatened by a common foe; and I have heard it said that the same effect is produced by outside interference in a family quarrel. With nations the effect is the same. The North in 1861 was unified as by an electric spark when Fort Sumter was fired upon. As Nicolay and Hay describe it, "The guns of the Sumter bombardment awoke the country from the political nightmare which had so long tormented and paralyzed it. The lion of the North was fully roused. Betrayed, insulted, outraged, the free States arose as with a cry of pain and vengeance. War sermons from pulpits; war speeches in every assemblage; tenders of troops; offers of money; military proclamations and orders in every newspaper; every city radiant with bunting; every village-green a mustering ground; war appropriations in every legislature and in every city or town council; war preparations in every public or private workshop; gun-casting in the foundries; cartridge making in the principal towns; camps and drills in the fields; parades, drums, flags, and bayonets in the streets; knitting, bandage-rolling, and lint-scraping in nearly every household. Before the lapse of forty-eight hours a Massachusetts regiment, armed and equipped, was on its way to Washington; within the space of a month the energy and intelligence of the country were almost completely turned from the industries of peace to the activities of war. The very children abandoned their old-time school-games, and

played only at soldiering."<sup>3</sup> Thus the North, which for historical, political and economic reasons had become a herd, was at once united by the attack of the South.

A similar effect was produced in Russia in 1812 by the invasion of the French army. "From the moment when Napoleon had crossed our frontier," wrote the Empress Elizabeth, "it was as though an electric spark had spread through all Russia; and if the immensity of its area had made it possible for the news to penetrate simultaneously to every corner of the empire, a cry of indignation would have arisen so terrible that I believe it would have resounded to every corner of the earth."<sup>4</sup> The psychologic effect produced upon a nation by a common danger is so well known that more than one statesman has aimed to create it by prescribing a foreign war as a certain remedy for internal dissensions. Bismarck had it in mind when by altering a telegram in 1870 he provoked the French to declare war against Germany. Seward's famous letter to Lincoln in 1861, advising war with Spain and France in order to unite the North and the South, is another example out of many. He wrote in "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration, April 1, 1861," "My system is built upon this *idea* as a ruling one, namely, that we must change the question before the public from one upon slavery, or about slavery, for a question upon union or disunion. In other words, from what would be regarded as a party question, to one of *Patriotism* or *Union* . . . I would demand explanation from Spain and France, categorically, at once. I would seek explanations from Great Britain and Russia, and send agents into Canada, Mexico, and Central America, to rouse a vigorous continental spirit of independence on this continent against European intervention. And, if satisfactory explanations are not received from Spain and France, would convene Congress and declare war against them."<sup>5</sup> Thus he planned to divert the

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Lincoln, a History, *Cent. Mag.*, Vol. 35, p. 898.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Lincoln, a History, Nicolay and Hay, *Cent. Mag.*, Vol. 35, p. 615.

thoughts of the people from internal dissensions, and unite them in a common feeling against a foreign foe, that is, to utilize for political reasons the instinct of the herd. The herd tends to unite in the presence of danger. This is as true of the nation as it is true of a drove of cattle, a flock of sheep, or a pack of wolves.

Now, observe that the unity thus occasioned is a unity arising from feeling and not from thought. It is instinctive, not rational. This is plainly the case with animals. They do not reason, but they unite just the same. With man reason may be and is at times and in particular cases a check upon union; but with the multitude reflection quickly succumbs to a sense of common danger, or of injured national honor, dignity or prestige; and unity is effected, and effected quickly because feeling is contagious. This instinctive disposition to unite in the presence of danger is obviously an advantage in the struggle for existence. Without it a group could not survive in the presence of united aggression. A nation that stopped to reason and argue itself to a rational basis of union would be defeated before it began to fight.

We are not concerned at present, however, with the value of the herd instinct or the dangers arising from it. We wish merely to point out that it sufficiently explains the unity existing in the countries recently at war. The people of a country may be expected to unite against a common foe no matter what the national cause may be. The union is instinctive, spontaneous, a union of feeling and not of thought. Hence the unanimity of a people at war has nothing whatever to do with the justice or righteousness of their cause. This explains why the Germans were united in unrighteousness. It explains also why the pacific principles of the German social democracy melted away as soon as war was declared. These principles and doctrines were rational formulations, matters of the head, but the national sentiment expressed in *Deutschland ueber Alles* was a matter of the heart, and the heart is older than the head. It has been well said that emotionally we are hundreds of thousands of years old, while rationally we are embryos.

The prevalent assumption, then, that the common people of Germany were driven into war by the ruling powers, or that there was during the war any essential difference in Germany between the national feeling of Kaiser and cobbler, was without foundation. The German Emperor expressed the real situation when he said, at the opening of the Reichstag immediately after war was declared, "We are all Germans now." The refrain in the German "Hymn of Hate," "we love as one, we hate as one" was the expression of a psychological fact based on the herd instinct. A recognition of the presence and power of this instinct would have prevented the expectation of an early revolution in Germany.

Before leaving this part of the subject we may observe that because of the instinctive reaction of the people of a country against the circumstances which provoke war, as, for instance, a national insult, a popular referendum of the question of peace or war, however desirable it might be on other grounds, would not be a sure mode of preventing war. In case of a real or fancied lesion of the national honor, dignity, or prestige, the people are even more likely to "lose their heads," that is, yield to the herd instinct, than are those in authority. Hence democracies are as prone to war as monarchies. The "king business" should be broken up, but war will not necessarily disappear with kings.

Another mistaken conception, entertained by some before the war, on account of their failure to recognize the reality and power of the herd instinct, was the idea that monied men, particularly those in control of the great banking interests, would not permit another war to take place. They had too much to lose. We see now how illfounded was this view. A knowledge of the herd instinct, and of the overwhelming power of herd feeling when once incited would have prevented that mistake.

So much, then, for the first characteristic of the herd, its tendency to unite. A second characteristic is its susceptibility to suggestion. This susceptibility is obviously a fact with respect to a herd of animals; it is peculiarly and con-

spicuously so with respect to a human herd, especially a mob. In a mob any suggestions of fear, anger, enthusiasm, elation, depression, etc., sweep through it almost instantaneously, and bring forth an immediate response. Hence, the mob is notoriously fickle, sentimental, unreasoning; now brave, now cringing, now cruel, now kind. Specialists in crowd psychology have pointed out, what anyone may easily observe, that a man in a crowd is very different from the same man when he is an isolated individual. His conscious individuality vanishes in the unconscious personality of the crowd. The crowd, we are told, has a collective mind and a collective consciousness. It is dominated by unconscious elements; it is credulous and short sighted. Says Le Bon, "By reason of the extreme sensibility of crowds, their sentiments, good or bad, are always exaggerated. This exaggeration increases still further in times of revolution. The least excitement will then lead the multitude to act with the utmost fury."<sup>6</sup>

The truth of this observation is well illustrated by the doings of crowds in the French Revolution. With Liberty, Equality and Fraternity on their lips Frenchmen, under the influence of the crowd spirit, indulged in orgies of blood-shed and cruelty no less revolting than the sack of Belgium or the murder of Edith Cavell. Thousands and thousands of innocent people were massacred; men and women, even old people, were burned alive; women and children were violated and afterwards murdered; tender babes were torn from their mothers' arms and tossed from bayonet to bayonet; men were compelled to dig their own graves and suffer themselves to be buried alive. No wonder Madame Roland cried out, on her way to the guillotine: "Liberty, liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!"

Now in all countries, in times of peace as well as in times of war, we may expect that there will be occasional manifestations of the crowd spirit. Citizens who are ordinarily peaceable and inoffensive will now and then assemble in a crowd and, seized with the crowd spirit, commit the most

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<sup>6</sup> The Psychology of Revolution, p. 102-3.



fiendish barbarities,—condemn an accused man without trial, for instance, and perhaps burn him at the stake; thus enacting in civilized communities the identical barbarity which we are accustomed to think of as peculiar to savage tribes.

Because of the stupidity, passion, and consequent danger of crowds every nation should endeavor through education to fortify its citizens against the contagion of the crowd spirit, and those in authority should do everything possible to prevent the formation of crowds. President Wilson displayed a high quality of leadership in his direct appeal to the people of this country, as soon as patriotism began to manifest the spirit of the mob, to avoid such manifestations as unworthy of a free and intelligent people.

But in Germany it so happened that the mode of making war thought to be most effective was directly provocative of the crowd spirit. When the German army laid waste every foot of land over which it retreated, destroyed every habitation; when it shot down in cold blood its hostages, or even all the inhabitants of a street or village in which someone had committed a hostile act, it acted in strict accordance with the military principles laid down by the German Staff. *Schrecklichkeit* was a deliberate policy adopted by that staff, and with professedly humane motives. "Terrorism," said General von Hartman, "is seen to be a relatively gentle procedure, useful to keep in a state of obedience the masses of the people."<sup>7</sup> But when soldiers proceed to carry out that policy, when the butchery begins, then a company of soldiers becomes a mob fired by the mob spirit, and there is no limit to the atrocities it will commit. "Nothing could be done against the excited crowd," said a German soldier with some small remnant of pity, "for at such times they are not men but beasts." "One gets an idea of the madness of our soldiers," says another, "when one sees the demolished villages. Not a single house intact. . . . Sheer vandalism was present

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<sup>7</sup> Militärische Notwendigkeit und Humanität, in *Deutsche Rundschau*, Vol. 13, p. 462.

as well as just anger." Carrier, a wholesale murderer of the French Revolution, declared that he took an intense joy in seeing his victims suffer; that he never laughed so much or experienced such pleasure as in watching the dying grimaces of the priests he killed. And so a German soldier notes in his diary, "It is for me a mad joy when we can revenge ourselves on these rascally Belgian and French priests."<sup>8</sup> Accounts of the atrocities of the German army are incredible only to those who are unacquainted with crowd psychology, and who do not perceive the relation between the policy of "frightfulness" and the development of the crowd spirit.

But while the herd is always capable under excitement of extreme manifestations of the mob spirit, the general truth with which we are here concerned is only that it is highly suggestible. It is uncritical in its attitude and accepts the most improbable statements. This fact was well illustrated by happenings in all of the warring countries. In Germany, for instance, as soon as war was declared, stories of the poisoning of rivers, the infection of water supplies by cholera microbes, and of the omnipresence of foreign spies, were generally circulated and generally believed. Circumstantial accounts of the assassination of more or less distinguished German citizens were published, and wild excitement aroused thereby, when these same citizens were alive and well. The German newspapers of the time show that the patriotic delirium and spy mania of Germany worked great harm even to the Germans themselves. It was not greatly different in other countries.

So much for herd suggestibility. A third characteristic of the herd is its docility in the hands of leaders. The herd follows the leader. So does the crowd. In a mob a leader is almost sure to appear. So in times of stress and excitement nations look to their leaders, and accept as leaders only those who sum up in themselves the fundamental feelings and spirit of the group. Because they are powerful centers of suggestion these leaders exercise an uncanny

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<sup>8</sup> Cited by T. de Wyzewa in *Revue des deux Mondes*, May 3, 1915.

influence. They determine in large measure the action of the people. Their responsibility is therefore great. Their power to lead is also a power to mislead! and if in times like these leaders do mislead, they will deserve all the condemnation they are likely to receive from impartial history. In the light of the susceptibility of a nation to suggestion, and its disposition almost blindly to follow its leaders, it is foolish to say, as some do, that nobody was responsible for the great war. We were all responsible more or less, perhaps unconsciously. But the responsibility lay primarily with those who willed it, and immediately with those who, because of their position, power, and prestige, were able to make their will effective.

These, then, are a few of the characteristics of the herd, whether it consists of animals or of men: it unites, it is highly susceptible to suggestion, it is controlled by leaders.

Now, in these respects, and in others, all herds, all nations, are alike. Still there are wide differences among animal herds and there are also wide differences among nations. A flock of sheep, a hive of bees, and a pack of wolves are alike in some respects but their differences are conspicuous. The same is true of nations. They resemble each other in some respects but in others they are as widely separated as the poles. How are we to account for these wide differences among nationalities, particularly among the recently opposing groups?

We cannot here enter upon a comparison of the score of nations that were engaged in the war, or even of the various animal herds. Such a comparison would be interesting and suggestive. A comparison of nations would have to be based, not upon superficial manifestations, but upon the particular ideas and ideals which in them have become common sentiments, specially ingrained in the people, and thus able to control national action. These ideals, sentiments, and interests constitute the character of a people. "Behind the institutions, arts, beliefs, and political upheavals of each people, lie certain moral, and intellectual characteristics that determine its evolution. . . . This

aggregate of psychological elements observed in all the individuals of a race constitutes what may rightly be called the national character."<sup>9</sup> The fundamental differences between nations, then, are differences in character, just as their fundamental resemblances are due to instinctive reactions.

Now if Germany as a nation—whatever may be said of its citizens individually—if the German herd displayed in the war a relatively low order of morality, the fact must be attributed to the sentiments and ideas that have become characteristic and dominant among the German people. What are these peculiar psychological elements? In a word they are the sentiments and ideas of militarism. Militarism has been the curse of Germany as it will be the curse of any other nation that adopts it.

We have now seen that because of the gregarious nature of man all the social units thus far formed, including the nation, are of the nature of herds, and manifest the characteristic herd phenomena; and that many of the conditions and events of the Great War can be understood or explained only on the basis of the herd instinct. It goes without saying that this instinct has served a valuable purpose in social evolution. Without it social cohesion would fail a nation at critical times, and unity of action, without a high development of the social consciousness, would be impossible. A significant tendency is revealed, also, in the group-forming influence of the herd instinct.

That tendency is toward the formation of larger and larger social groups. In the great world war we had the incipient formation of two groups of humanity larger than the nation, two overherds as it were, consisting of the nations allied on either side, and in which the primary phenomena of the herd began to appear. It is improbable that the victorious nations associated in the war, which fought together against a common foe, which thought and acted in unison in matters relating to war, which are more or

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<sup>9</sup> Le Bon, G., *Psychology of Peoples*, pp. 5-6.

less conscious of a common national purpose, will ever return to their former state of relative isolation and independence. They are more likely to remain united, to "form a more perfect union" to develop a distinctive character of its own. If this should be the case it will point to the realization of the dream of world union. Philosophers of all countries have predicted world-integration. Said Fichte: "It is the vocation of our race to unite itself into one single body, all the parts of which shall be thoroughly known to each other, and all possessed of similar culture. Nature, and even the passions and vices of man have, from the beginning, tended toward this end; a great part of the way towards it is already passed, and we may surely calculate that this end, which is the condition of all further progress, will in time be attained."<sup>10</sup> Kant described the goal of history as a world republic, the conscious end of which should be the well-being and progress of humanity as a whole. Perhaps the part played by the instinct of the herd in the progress of mankind toward a desired if not inevitable goal is not yet complete, and not fully appreciated.

But, be that as it may, and admitting the value of this instinct as a factor in group survival, it forms no satisfactory basis for a distant unity of nations, or for the unity of a nation of to-day. After all is said, the herd instinct remains an instinct, and it can play no higher rôle with respect to a nation than is played by animal instinct in the biological world. Among animals instinctive reactions often result in wonderful adaptations. But while instinct is itself a product of evolution, it does not produce evolution; it is a passive element; it creates nothing; the more nearly perfect it is, the more likely it is to lead to the destruction of the animal species possessing it if the conditions under which it was developed undergo a change. The very essence of an instinct, as Darwin remarked, is that it is followed independently of reason. Intelligence

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *Contemporary Review*, September, 1901, p. 397.

alone is dynamic. It is the factor by which instincts are modified, and instinctive impulses inhibited, restrained, and directed. It is therefore the only safe reliance of a nation. Knowledge alone can make the world safe for democracy; only the truth can make us free.

It is the fashion in certain schools of thought to exalt instinct and disparage intelligence. Goethe's lines, with reference to man,

"Better he might have fared, poor wight,  
Hadst thou not given him a gleam of heavenly light;  
Reason he names it and doth so  
Use it, than brutes more brutish still to grow."

although uttered by Mephistopheles, are taken seriously. But without reason it would be absolutely impossible for man to determine his own progress and civilization. Intelligence is the sole means by which he may rise to the high possibilities of his manhood. Man, the individual, is therefore expected to bring as rapidly as possible all of his instincts and faculties under intelligent control and direction.

In like manner the nation should endeavor to supplant its purely instinctive activities, however useful they may have been in the past, by the ordered procedure of reflective intelligence. Said Galton: "A really intelligent nation might be held together by far stronger forces than are derived from the purely gregarious instinct. It would not be a mob of slaves, clinging together, incapable of self-government, and begging to be led; but it would consist of vigorous, self-reliant men, knit to one another by innumerable attractions, into a strong, tense, and elastic organization. Our present natural dispositions make it simply impossible for us to attain this ideal standard, and therefore the slavishness of the mass of men, in morals and in intellect, must be an admitted fact in all schemes of regenerative policy. The hereditary taint due to the primeval barbarism of our race, and maintained by later influences, will have to be bred out of it before our descendants can rise to the position of free members of a free and intelligent

society."<sup>11</sup> Blind instinctive social action of whatever kind is evidence of a low stage of social development. Each nation therefore should strive, no matter what the exciting circumstances may be, to order its activities exactly as an intelligent individual controls the impulsive activities of his own life. Only thus may social unity be based upon righteousness and justice, suggestion be utilized in the interest of order, and the control of leaders be truly progressive.

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<sup>11</sup> Francis Galton, "Gregariousness in Cattle and in Men," *Macmillan's*, May, Vol. 23, p. 357.